



Actions taken by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service to accelerate processing and improving of Resource Advisory Committee Nominations

Directive:

The Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, 2023 (House Report 117-400) directed the Secretary of Agriculture to continue accelerating processing and approving of [Resource Advisory Committee] nominations as soon as possible and to report to the Committee within 90 days of enactment of this Act on the status of these nominations.

Report:

The Forest Service currently has 91 Secure Rural Schools (SRS) RACs. As of December 12, 2022, 38 RACs had sufficient members for a quorum¹ and 53 RACs lacked a quorum. Twenty-eight of the 53 RACs lacking a quorum, which were extended by the Secretary of Agriculture for two years beginning on December 21, 2020, expired December 21, 2022. RACs without a quorum, and in inactive status, are not permitted to make funding recommendations for SRS Title II projects and investments in local communities.

Inherent membership retention challenges and a dilatory nomination process are the primary contributors to insufficient membership numbers. In November 2022, the Forest Service convened a team of employees from multiple staff areas² to collaborate and streamline the overall review process of RAC nomination packages³. The team completed a nomination package checklist in November 2022 and updated the SRS Title II process guide in December 2022. These changes are expected to increase efficiencies in the nomination process. Additionally, multiple meetings, independent of regularly scheduled committee meetings, were conducted in fiscal year 2022 with SRS Regional Coordinators and Designated Federal Officers⁴ to review required Federal Advisory Committee Act and SRS processes, and where possible, improve inefficiencies in the nomination package tracking system and the Title II project recommendation process. The team also updated their internal review process so that nomination packages undergo a supplementary level of review before submission, resulting in additional feedback to the Designated Federal Officer and SRS Regional Coordinator. In April 2022, FACA implemented a nomination package clearance flow chart that outlines the steps in the nomination package process based on the new guidelines indicated in the Infrastructure Investment Job Act (Public Law 117-58).

¹ An active RAC requires a minimum of nine, and a maximum of 15, members.

² RAC nomination strike team includes employee from the National Partnership Office, Office of Regulatory and Management Services, and Regional SRS Coordinators.

³ A nomination package may include one or multiple nominees.

⁴ A Designated Federal Officer is an appointed permanent employee responsible for approving meeting agendas and attending, leading, and adjourning RAC meetings.



The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-334), also known as the 2018 Farm Bill, established a pilot program granting authority to the Regional Foresters in Region 1 (Northern Region) and Region 3 (Southwestern Region) to process and approve RAC nominees in Montana and Arizona. Under this program, RAC nomination packages can be completed in 10 to 31 days, compared to 90 days for nomination packages reviewed and approved by either the Secretary of Agriculture or the USDA Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment. Currently, all four RACs in Arizona, and eleven of twelve RACs in Montana, have a quorum.